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Lebanon on a knife edge

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Tensions in Lebanon are escalating once again as Saudi Arabia threatens to open up yet another front in its cold war with Iran. The trigger for the latest crisis was the resignation of prime minister Saad Hariri, who has been the Saudi's main representative since the assassination of his father in 2005.

The circumstances of the resignation are extremely dubious. According to the Independent newspaper, Hariri had gone to visit the Saudi king after receiving an unexpected summons just days after a previous trip. At some point, he was surrounded by Saudi police and his phone confiscated. He has since been more or less incommunicado, either refusing or unable to explain his rationale or plans.

For months, Hariri had been facing criticism from hardline Sunni leaders in Lebanon, plus the Saudis themselves, after forming a cabinet by endorsing Hezbollah-aligned Michel Aoun for president last year. This came after a two-year stalemate between the pro-Hezbollah and pro-Hariri wings of the establishment, which had left Lebanon without an official government and substantially delayed parliamentary elections, last held in 2009.

The government has nothing to recommend it, having failed to do anything to resolve lingering economic and social crises in the country. Instead, it focused on updating the archaic and sectarian electoral system in a way that entrenches communal loyalties and the power of the elites. It also oversaw a crackdown on freedom of speech and protest, and has attempted to build a cult of the military to quash dissent.

Yet nobody was expecting this resignation, least of all Hariri himself, who had scheduled several meetings in the days after his impromptu trip. The overwhelming response in Lebanon, including from the leaders of Hezbollah and Hariri's Future Movement, has been to demand Saudi Arabia let him return to Lebanon. This is a correct response to Saudi attempts to stoke sectarian conflict to regain influence in the country.

Building crisis

The two sides of the political schism in Lebanon are equally reprehensible, led by corrupt dynasties of criminal patriarchs who have enriched themselves at the cost of the workers and poor of the country. Their social bases eroded as economic conditions deteriorated, a process accelerated by the lack of investment from the Gulf following the 2015 oil price crash. To prop up their support, they have turned to increasingly sectarian and authoritarian methods of organising, tactics refined to an art in a country defined by its recurring social and constitutional crises.

The balance of power between the two blocks has been shifting in favour of Hezbollah and its allies, who have benefited from the party's superior military and organisational capacities. This process began following the 2006 war, in which Hezbollah inflicted a massive defeat on Israel, resulting in a surge of support across Lebanon and the Arab world.

For a while, the party de-emphasised the sectarian aspects of its program in favour of a sort of plebeian Arab nationalism, and lent its support to many of the uprisings in 2011. When Hezbollah refused Hariri's demand that it abolish its independent communication and military apparatuses, it received substantial support – many people recognised them as crucial to the party's successful resistance to Israel.

This changed following the outbreak of the revolution in Syria, when Hezbollah adopted an unswerving defence of Assad, who was a long time ally of Iran, their primary source of funding and military training. This involved sending thousands of soldiers to fight directly, and providing crucial logistical support and training for several Iranian-backed sectarian Shi'ite militias that had largely replaced the defunct Syrian Army.

Because of this, the yellow flag of Hezbollah is front and centre in most footage of "regime victories" against the rebels. The party has also played a role in supporting the Houthis against the Saudi intervention in Yemen, although in an overwhelmingly advisory capacity. The effect of this shift has been no small contribution to the heightened sectarian discourse across the region in recent times.

Saudi aggression

The Saudis have watched the steady rise in the power and influence of Hezbollah with equal parts fear and loathing. While they've failed to halt its rise within Lebanese politics, they have successfully lobbied the Arab League to add Hezbollah to its list of terrorist organisations, which has resulted in economic and political difficulties for the group.

Imposing regional constraints on Iran and its allies has become a growing priority because Iran has essentially taken over the affairs of the Iraqi and Syrian states. Allowing Lebanon to fall into the Iranian sphere of influence would be a defeat that the crisis-ridden Saudis could ill afford.

Yet this is exactly what has been happening. It is likely that Hariri's resignation is merely the first step in a concerted effort by the new Saudi regime to organise a political alliance that can turn the political tide in Lebanon back in its favour.

The main factor underpinning this sudden shift in Saudi policy is the rise of crown prince Mohammad bin Salman, who has staked his career on transforming the oil-rich kingdom. His goal is to privatise state assets, expand the exploitation of both immigrant and domestic workers in special tax-free economic zones and push back against Iranian influence across the region. As an addendum to these grand plans, bin Salman has also promised to allow women to drive by 2018, an unremarkable reform praised to high heaven by cynical Western media elites for whom the bill was designed.

All of this entails a massive shakeup of what is otherwise a highly conservative establishment, with the inevitable backlash that entails. To preclude serious opposition, the enterprising young prince has done what all good dictators do and sent his rivals to jail.

Prospects

It is difficult to predict what comes next. As is typical in Lebanese politics, there is a dizzying array of local, regional and global actors with a stake in the game.

Judging from the past week, it would be a mistake to underestimate the imperial arrogance of the new crown prince. The devastating assault and siege on Yemen that he initiated in 2015 as defence minister indicates that he is prepared to do whatever it takes to impose his will.

The Trump administration won't be a fetter on any Saudi military ambitions. It sold the regime \$100 billion in weaponry earlier this year on the basis of support for exactly this sort of aggressive approach. In fact, weakening Hezbollah in Lebanon would probably be welcomed by an administration trying to find ways of undermining Iran and Obama's nuclear deal.

The Israelis – close allies of the Saudis going way back – have joined the renewed campaign against Hezbollah, threatening a new war on Lebanon. This week the outgoing Israeli air force commander boasted: "What we could do in 34 days during the second Lebanon war [in 2006] we can now do in 48 to 60 hours. The growth of our strength has not been linear. This is potential power unimaginable in its scope".

The 2006 assault on Lebanon cost 1,200 lives, with 5,000 more wounded. The Israeli newspaper Ha'aretz reported that Israel used more than a million illegal cluster bombs during the month-long war, half of which failed to detonate on impact. They continue to explode in the hands of unsuspecting civilians. White phosphorus, akin to napalm, was used extensively and ruined crucial infrastructure and farmlands, setting the country back years.

The Israelis are also concerned by the ongoing influence of Hamas, which also has ties to Iran via Hezbollah.

Domestically, Lebanon is perpetually split between sectarian leaders who differ only on the prospect of who is to profit from the plundering of the country. While unity has prevailed thus far in demanding Hariri's return, it is possible that some opportunist figure will decide that there is a career to be made in being the Saudi/Israeli stooge.

Given Hezbollah's increased military and organisational prowess following its extended counter-revolutionary intervention into Syria, another war is not necessarily the most likely outcome. However, both the Saudis and the Israelis are led by tyrants with a record of aggressive militarism and both are frustrated by Iran's successes, so it cannot be discounted.

Eventually, only the abolition of the sectarian model of Lebanese politics can allow the country to move past these periodic crises. For now, the left must oppose Saudi and Israeli intervention, and be prepared to mobilise against a horrific new war.

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